

## **The concept of nation, today**

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### **1. Introduction**

The events in Catalonia today are unquestionably serious and unique. They are calling on us to make an effort to understand them in all their complexity. We have developed these reflections with the intention of being impartial and even-keeled, as they follow neither the line nor the ideology of any party or political movement. We want to expand on and deepen what we said in our book *Raó de Catalunya, La societat catalana al segle XXI* (Giner and Homs, 2016), a compilation of different authors' contributions which we co-edited, and to which we also contributed. An entire roster of the top domestic experts in economics, demographics, anthropology, history, urban geography, communication and sociology contributed with their own chapters. It would simply make no sense to ignore it as we flesh out the observations below.

It is quite unique that in the midst of the 21st century, Spain, a liberal democratic European state, is trying to resolve the conflict in Catalonia with the police and the courts. It is also striking that in the midst of the era of globalisation, Catalan society is capable of persistently mobilising peacefully and in large numbers, the vast majority calling for the right to decide, which all the peoples in the world have, through the citizens' will.

Both phenomena are related to the way we humans live together in society, that is, with what we understand today as nations. The recent history of the relations between Spain and Catalonia is sufficiently evocative of a poorly-resolved conflict that in the best of cases it leads to frustrated attempts to regenerate the state, then runs through eras of "tolerance" (Ortega), while in the worst of cases it explodes into periods of upheaval. This cyclical temporal fluctuation of the relations between the two societies, Catalan and Spanish, should be a sufficient reason to attempt to lay the groundwork for building a stable era of fruitful, fraternal relations.

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The political scientist Josep M. Colomer (2016) states that the problem is longstanding. Spain has always suffered from weak national cohesion. Spain had an early, vast and extremely costly empire, which left the modern Spanish State relatively enfeebled. The subsequent construction of a culturally unified Spanish nation remained unfinished business. In particular, the Spanish state and nation were too weak to integrate into unitary, centralised structures and to bring major swaths of the Catalan and Basque people into a single cultural pattern dominated by Castile. The Catalans and Basques were then strengthened by early industrialisation. In fact, as we ourselves have stated, in contrast to other European countries, industrialisation only magnified the interregional differences on the Iberian Peninsula: neither centralism nor Jacobinism diminished them.

The Spanish State was strong enough to prevent Catalonia and the Basque Country from building alternative nations and states. Or from another angle, the Catalan and Basque societies were cohesive enough to resist Spain's unilateral assimilation, but too weak to construct their own unified nations.

## **2. Nation, state, and society**

In just a few lines, we have drawn from concepts like society, nation and state to describe phenomena whose distinctions are not obvious. If we wanted to complicate matters even further and add country, people, fatherland, citizenry, nationalism, Catalanism, Spanishism and Jacobinism, our argument would not be as neat as we would like. They are concepts which are usually used for the same purpose. Any attempt to clarify them would require entire lengthy books which would extend far beyond the scope of this modest article and bore the reader. Let us stick with the concepts of state, nation and society.

University of London professor Montserrat Guibernau (1999) reminds us that the concept of nation can never be considered in isolation, and she distinguishes between state, nation and nationalism. We would like to add society from a more sociological perspective.

The easiest concept to define is the state, which is clearly delimited by its authority over law and order; a state has clear frontiers and a known and (more or less efficient) organisation. Everyone knows what state they belong to, and their affiliation is regulated. Since the French Revolution, the democratic state exists by and for its citizenry, which holds sovereignty. The state does not hold the sovereignty but instead the citizenry owns the state.

In contrast, nation is the hypostasis of the tribe. And so it was a thousand years ago, when it had to share this quality, which uplifted the people to a high level where it was confused with the sacred. It is today, as well, even where the march of secularisation has marginalised religion to the space reserved for its believers. The fact is that no matter how much we want to view the nation in secular or secularising terms, it always belongs to the universe of the transcendental or at least the sacred for its members. This is why one of the best treatises on nations and nationalism in the late 20th century, the one by the deceased University of London professor Josep Ramon Llobera (2006), bears the accurate title, *The God of Modernity*.

The quasi-religious features of any nation are obvious, even if we do not believe them; at least in our own nation, we should consider ourselves openly faithful to a supernatural faith. Worshipping one's own nation, or at least expressing love and devotion towards it, are praiseworthy and respectable around the world, albeit with the clear understanding that nationalistic fanaticism is something else which quashes the feelings of joyful fealty to the fatherland. However, it is impossible to reduce a nation to the most empirical, material sphere since nations are made of rituals, declarations of loyalty and emotions that motivate our behaviour and push our reactions.

The concept of nation has evolved over time, and so has the way individuals interact with it. Thus, the Valencian anthropologist Joan Francesc Mira (1985) views a nation as a process which is comprised of both tragic and heroic stories, just like everything that refers to human behaviour. A nation adapts to the circumstances of each era, under the influence of internal factors (the value individuals have attached to collective identity) or external factors (relations with other nations). In any case, what we can see countless times and universally is the persistence over time of the human need to establish meaningful relations among individuals who share feelings, territories, ideas and cultural traits. Denying this is deliberately failing to recognise the most elementary scholarly contributions by sociology and ethnology in their bid to explain our societies.

Here is where we must entertain the concept of society, meant from a sociological perspective as the social order grounded upon the specific relations among people who live together in a given space and evolve over time. The concept of society refers to the more relational and consolidated aspects of human coexistence. Humans are precisely the living beings who are capable of organising societies beyond filial, kinship and tribal relations, such that we have been capable of colonising the entire planet. "We human organise ourselves around whom to care for and why we should care for them" (Bestard, 2017).

In contrast, the concept of nation refers to the cultural dimension of societies. The idea of nation began to emerge in the transitional period between mediaeval and modern societies during the Renaissance, when vassals and subjects became citizens and the separation between private and public spaces began (Sennett, 2011). The new citizenry recognised themselves as a nation in order to make their new political status meaningful and justify the basis of their sovereignty. The concept of nation that reached its classical formulation in 19th-century Romanticism was constructed in this historical process. The concept was soon co-opted by the power relations of the new states which emerged during this period in order to secure cohesiveness and subjugate the citizenry to the interests of the new ruling classes and elites with the construction of the nation-states. Thus, nations are the battlefields where the power relations of modern societies are expressed. They have given rise to execrable attitudes and behaviours, such as the countless struggles among nations over control of the planet, or the Fascist and Nazi tendencies that Europe experienced in the first half of the 20th century. Yet at the same time, they have contributed reams of heroism and grandiosity through the liberation of societies that were enslaved or subjugated to stronger powers.

Today there are still some people who deny the existence of nations, as if humans could live aseptically as isolated individuals interacting with other

individuals, governed by the norms and rules of states. Some of them are perceived as artificial and alien.

The relations between the concepts of state, nation and society have given rise to confusion, and some authors (Álvarez Junco, 2016) find it difficult to discern the distinctness of each notion and their usefulness in understanding humans' behaviour in society. The state encompasses the political aspects of managing the common good; the nation covers the cultural aspects of the collective consciousness, that is, identity; society encompasses the relational and organisational aspects of a single phenomenon associated with the social coexistence of humans. Reducing the independence of each concept and subjugating it to the concept of the state by claiming that the state covers the entire perimeter of social relations, that is, that there is no nation or society outside the state and that all three are confused or subjugated to the power of the state, is a totalitarian conception of state which breaks with the entire democratic and liberal tradition since the French Revolution and leads to the technocratic and bureaucratic sense that Ray Bradbury so aptly reflected in his dystopian novel *Fahrenheit 451*, which François Truffaut translated so masterfully into cinema. Each dystopia that appears in the world of culture negates and subverts a utopia.

### 3. Catalonia

We can establish the real nature of the conflicts which are being rekindled all over the world among societies, nations and states precisely because these three concepts are useful for analysing the social reality.

In the case of Catalonia, the concepts of Catalanism and nationalism have been used somewhat ambiguously to describe the historical process of collective identification among a large portion of citizens who inhabit Catalonia. Sometimes this is because of a lack of sufficient conceptualisation of nation, and others times it is to avoid a certain conceptualisation of nationalism which led to the worst moments in the recent history of humanity, and yet others times it is precisely to avoid recognition of the very concept of nation.

Today, people usually talk about Catalanism to describe the collective identification with the language and the country, while in contrast they speak of nationalism as identity with the desire to achieve sovereignty. On the other hand, some who support sovereignty do not want to be confused with a certain restricted interpretation of nationalism. Today they define themselves as sovereignists to distinguish themselves from those who call for independence as a form of political interaction with Spain. Catalanists, sovereignists, nationalists and independentists comprise the richness of the different ways our collective identity can be captured. These nuances do not conform to a linear evolution, nor a historical one leading towards a preestablished concept of nation; instead, they are the outcome of different forms of expression at any given time depending on the circumstances, the fluctuations and the times in which we live.

It has always been difficult to come up with a definition of what a nation is that is satisfactory to everyone, and now, well into the 21st century, it is still difficult. No nation fits a single empirical, objective definition. There is no perfect sociological model of nation: neither language, nor territory, nor

collective psychology, nor public worship, nor the number in favour of or against it define it solidly. Despite this, radical scepticism is not called for either. Thus, well into the 21st century, there are citizens – indeed, the majority of them in Catalonia – willing to give their nation all the loyalty and civic worship it needs.

Regardless of the way we choose to define the concept of nation, the stubborn persistence over time of the Catalans' expression of their desire to be a nation in the sense proffered by Vicens Vives (1956) should suffice to recognise the existence of a collective national identity that is striving for political recognition. Collective identity is a human need to go beyond the family group and organise broader societies, a capacity that has been and still is one of the most fundamental expressions of the grandeur of humanity. We must recognise this, yet without forgetting the possible excesses of any politics that is overly grounded in identity. They can be dire and devastating, as we well know. Identity as awareness of belonging and shared nature does not harm: however, other identities should never be condemned. We are not contradicting ourselves by saying this: we know that we are Catalans, or as the popular adage says, 'we are and ever will be' ('som i serem'). However, other peoples, too – Basques, Portuguese, Spanish, Cubans, Russians, Polish, Czech – are also aware of their own respective identities. We are not free of prejudice and never have been, but we have to acknowledge that the ethnic exclusion of other peoples has always been low in Catalonia, a crossroads, a land of inclusion, a place of ethnic mixing. This is not a gratuitous statement. Studies of the Catalan nation's integration and incorporation of peoples from elsewhere throughout history confirm it time and time again.

The transversality of the contributions of nationalism or Catalanism over time serves as yet further evidence of the existence of the nation. The contributions by Valentí Almirall and Prat de la Riba; those by Bishop Torres i Bages, Rovira i Virgili and Macià; and the more recent ones by Jordi Pujol exemplify the heterogeneity of a plural society bisected by economic class and social interests, and they make it difficult to uphold the subordination of the concept of nation to specific economic or political interests. This evidence is further bolstered by sociological studies that have never turned a blind eye to studying the social inequality in Catalonia: its bourgeoisie, working classes, peasants, poor, immigrants and excluded members of society. Nothing justifies ignoring these elements, which some rightfully call the 'social reality'. We ourselves, as sociologists and the authors of these reflections, have studied and drawn attention to them. However, we always go back to notions of a collective consciousness which is shared by the vast majority of our compatriots. We always go back to Catalonia as an essential part of our shared imaginary.

Surely the way the defenders of the Catalan lands in 1713 or 1714 experienced the nation, or those in the turbulent 1930s, or during the Franco regime, or the experiences of the current generations who have grown up in freedom and democracy, have little to do with each other. Yet they all claim a common identity.

However, just as we vehemently assert the existence of a Catalan society comprised as a nation for many years, we also have to admit the existence in Catalonia of a Spanish society recognised as a nation, which has managed to construct a state. History illustrates that when a nation does manage to

construct a state, the notion of nation shrinks in order to bring cohesion to its citizenry and not recognise other national realities that may coexist within its territory. Yet when this state is not capable of diluting the other national identities that it encompasses, or of recognising the existence of internal plurinationality, the unrecognised nations can be expected to demand recognition. This, then, generates serious territorial conflicts, and this is the story of the evolution in relations between Spain and Catalonia. It has characterised the history of the last three centuries, and it is also what defines the uniqueness of the situation in Catalonia. Thus, there are two societies, two nations in the same territory, and the government of one state which systematically refuses to recognise the two nations.

The relations between the two societies-nations have been scarcely studied and are not known in depth. Yet an understanding of the relations between these two realities is and will be crucial to understanding what is happening and to help find the right solutions. They are two nations which we could describe as Siamese twins. Having reached a certain point in their development, one of the two aspires to more freedom of movement, and therefore the option of trying to separate them seems legitimate, but it must be done with a great deal of care and an extremely fine scalpel so that both can survive.

#### **4. Identities in the era of globalisation**

The experience of collective identities in the era of the Internet and globalisation is very different to those expressed in the 20th century. At a time when a planetary collective identity is being constructed which is shared with many identities in an ever-smaller geographic scope, the West, Europe, Spain, Catalonia and one's own village or city, one finds oneself sharing one's identity with other similar identities through family affiliation, friendships, sports relationships, religious beliefs and other factors. Therefore, identities become diluted, are shared hierarchically and become superimposed upon each other, but they never completely disappear.

Just as secularism has diluted religious identity but has not eliminated or replaced it, social classes, as an expression of the identity shared by people who have the same socioeconomic status, has also been diluted but not vanished. Similarly, internationalisation, tourism, the Internet, migratory flows and frequent travel abroad have diluted national identity but neither eliminated nor replaced it. And let us not forget the relative erosion that each social entity experiences because of these powerful external influences.

In the age of increasing secularism, religious identity is more needed than ever, and in the age of globalisation, class interests still shape economic activity. In the era of difficult global governability, national identities are more needed than ever as a way to develop humanity's expanding capacity beyond the tribe that characterises human beings. The family, religion, social classes and the nation will continue to be the fundamental phenomena of human coexistence and sociability and are part of the human DNA (Chopra, Atran et al., 2015; Arbós and Giner, 1999).

National identity is evolving towards a situation of voluntary affiliation (Tresserras, 2016) with a collective space, and this will only be further

heightened in the future as the dimensions of time and space are swiftly changing apace with technological innovations and the accelerating dynamics of globalisation. The challenge is to organise states to manage the common goods in which people with different identities with which they are voluntarily affiliated coexist in the same territory. Striving to homogenise states into exclusionary, homogeneous nationalities is merely a chimera of the past. The nation-state model is in crisis and has no future. National sentiment is also evolving towards a more secular and less sacred conception, as revealed in the low-grade epic of the current process in Catalonia.

The heterogeneity of the ways states can be organised should not be confused with the relative homogeneity in the forms of collective identification. Religions only encompass those who believe in a given god; classes do not accept members of other social strata; families are governed by rules of consanguinity or cohabitation; the followers of a sports club only cheer their own club. The state is responsible for laying out the rules so that all forms of expression of shared identities can coexist together peaceably and in a civilised fashion in the same territory. This is also the main challenge when planning the construction of new states.

For these reasons, the evolution in the concept of nation is shifting in order to make it more compatible with the vast dispersion of shared identities, that is, in relation to “others”, permanently abandoning the exclusionary conceptions that prevailed in the past. What Catalonia has experienced in recent years is a vast and extraordinarily intense social and political movement that cannot be pigeonholed within the classical features of a nationalist movement and instead points to new forms of 21st-century “democratic revolt”. It extends beyond the Catalan space to fit within the movements on behalf of change which are being manifested in many different countries around problems that mobilise people, such as the environmental crisis, endangered peace and resistance to the inequalities and ills of capitalism.

The breadth of the grassroots outcry, the extraordinary civility of the Catalan civic movement, the total absence of political violence, the serene and often festive nature of the street demonstrations, the pro-European spirit, the absence of ethnic confrontation, and the polite and respectful messages make it difficult to narrowly funnel the way forward into the classical coordinates of ethnic-based nationalist movements or those that reject the Other, such as the more recent ones in Eastern Europe.

The messages and discourses underway now around the way forward should be more extensively analysed. However, what stands out at first glance is a set of values that have nothing to do with the underlying burden of the traditional nationalistic discourse:

- The extremely broad consensus around the right to decide as an expression of democratic quality, proximity and the yearning to better control the external factors that conditions one’s personal life.
- The absence of an ethnic, exclusionary debate that looks down on non-Catalans.

- The inclusive affirmation of a single county not separated by backgrounds. Respect for the Spanish-speaking people.
- The intense pro-European feeling, even though it may be critical of some European Union policies.
- The recourse to history, often geared towards undergirding plans for a shared future, without major drama or patriotic exaltation. The word “fatherland” is seldom used, perhaps in reaction to its inflationary use by the more reactionary forces on the Spanish Right.
- The infrequent recourse to the subordination of the individual to the group, to the nation that is both imagined and beloved by the Catalan people.

In any event, this is a reformulation of the debate – essentially moral and not just sociological – on how human communities should be organised and what the best level of governance is within the framework of intensified globalisation. Inasmuch as states grant competences to more global levels and do not hold some of the keys to governing the people’s wellbeing, local solidarities gain ground, often around cities, and the demand for a greater capacity to control the decision that affect people’s everyday lives is surging everywhere.

Those of us who cultivate the social sciences should be bold enough to confront these conceptual, theoretical and, of course, also practical difficulties. It is a difficult job, but we accept it. There is no facile formula to define our weary tribe, the one that we have fearlessly yet somewhat ruefully defined as the hypostasis of the tribe in the modern age. Which we have also defined, despite our commitment to scientific reason and reliable factors, as a sacred entity in the people’s social imaginary. It is fairly unlikely that the evils chasing us today will compel us to change our opinion.

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